Higher Education in Portugal: Towards a More Inclusive System

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Secretary of State for Higher Education, Portugal

Vienna, 25th November 2025

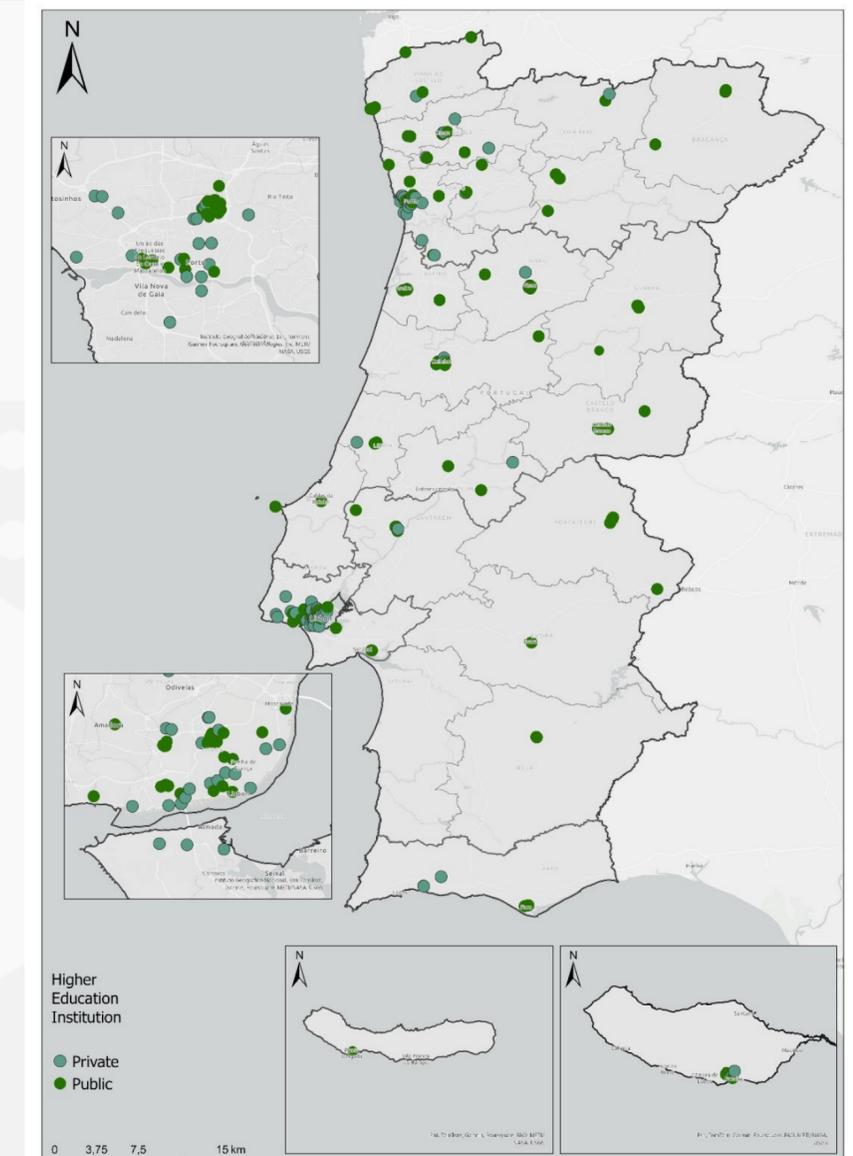# Network of higher education institutions in Portugal

Portugal has 94 Higher Education Institutions, public and private, plus two military and police academies.

It is a binary system composed of university and polytechnic institutions, widely distributed across the country.
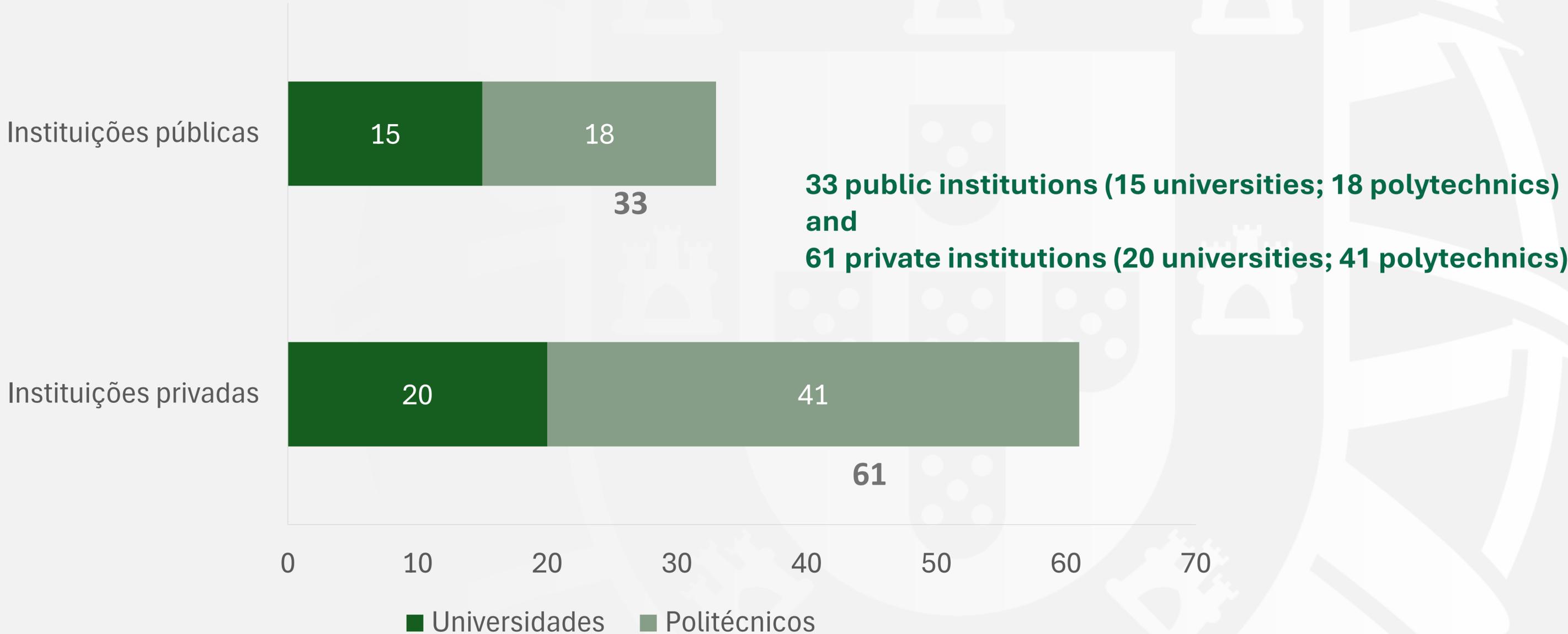
Universities award Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral and, in specific fields (e.g., Medicine, Architecture), Integrated Master's degrees.

Polytechnic institutions award Short-Cycle Technical Professional Programmes , Bachelor's and Master's degrees, and more recently Doctoral degrees in areas aligned with their mission, often in collaboration with universities.
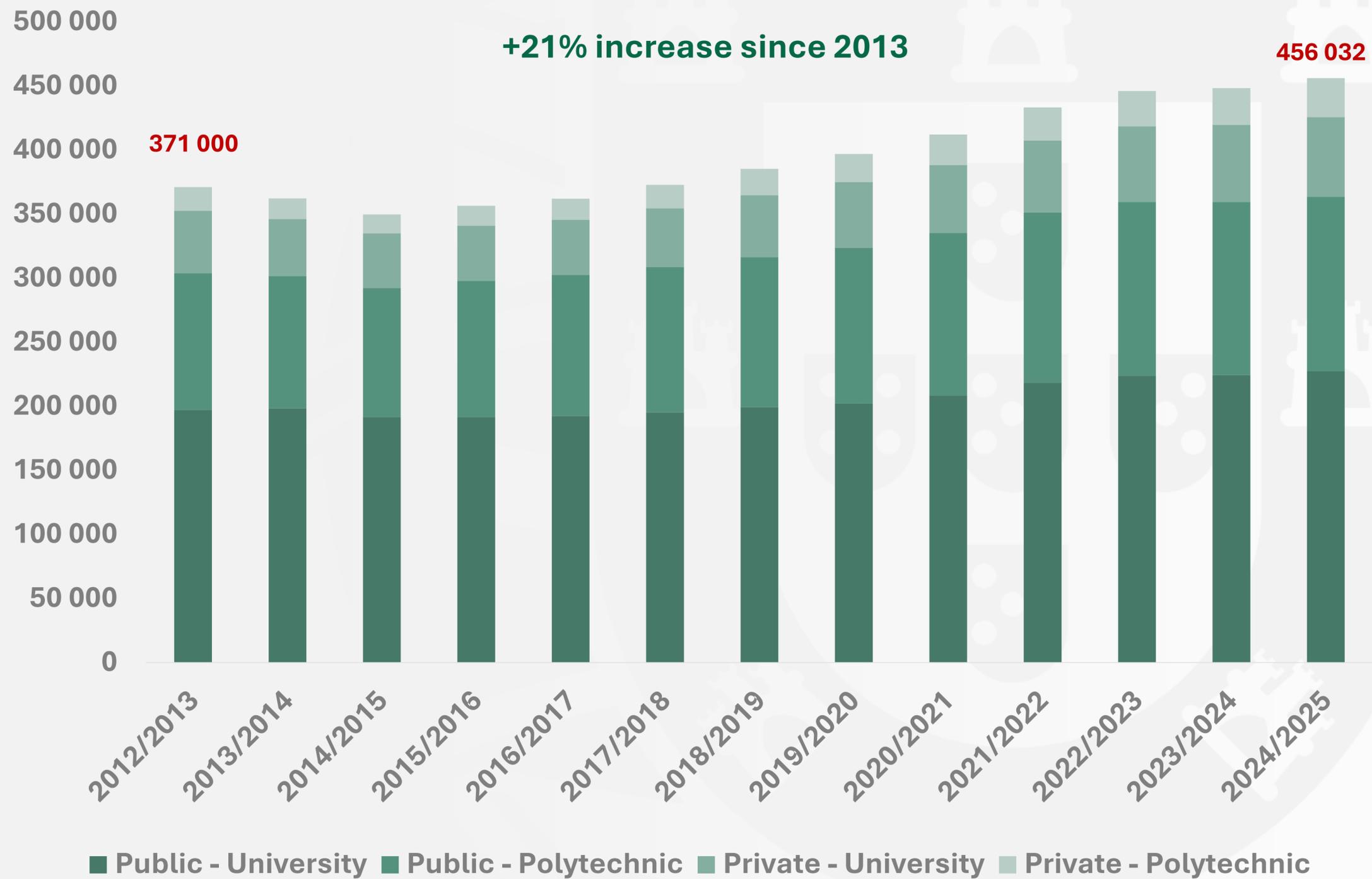
The Higher Education Act (2007) is currently under revision to reinforce institutional autonomy and to recognise more explicitly the continuum between universities and polytechnic universities, while maintaining the binary structure.
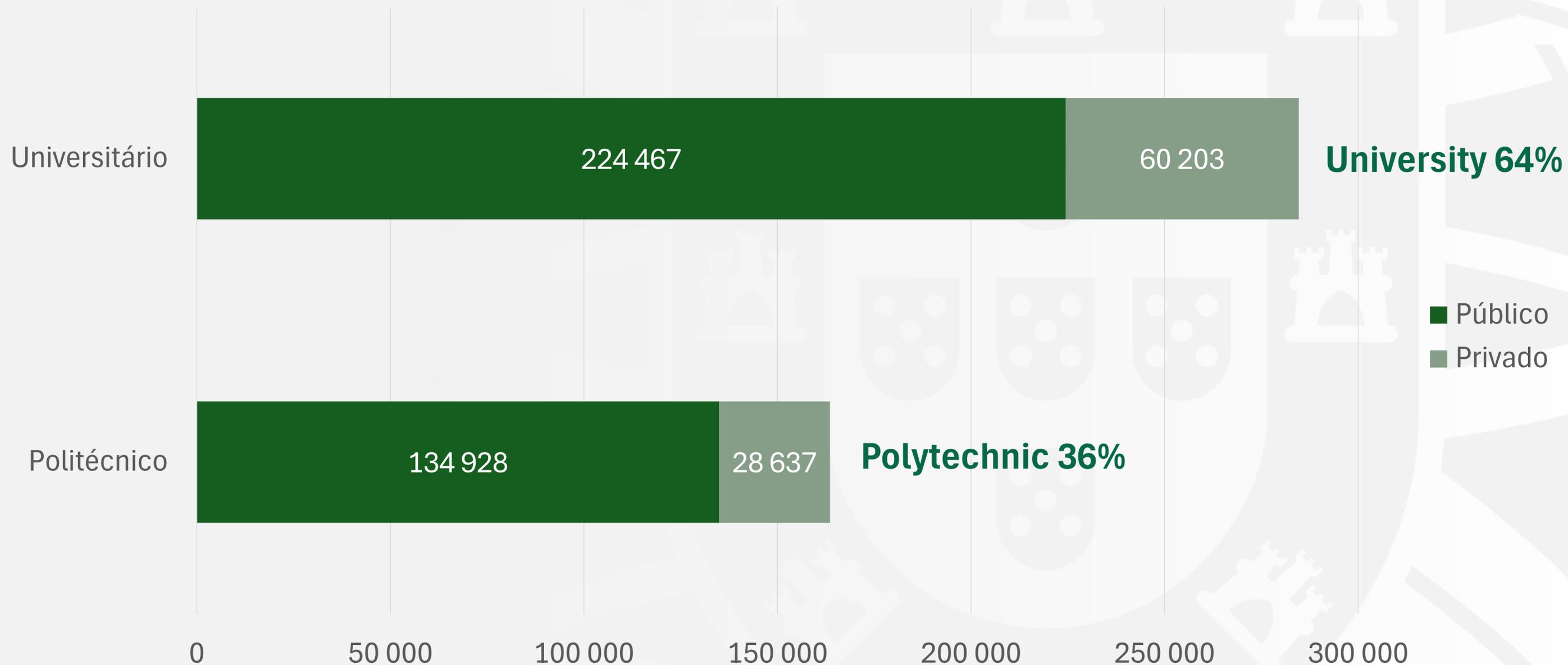

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Public and Private Higher Education Institutions

33 public institutions (15 universities; 18 polytechnics) and
61 private institutions (20 universities; 41 polytechnics)

Instituições públicas: Universidades 15, Politécnicos 18, Total **33**

Instituições privadas: Universidades 20, Politécnicos 41, Total **61**

■ Universidades ■ Politécnicos

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A growing number of students

+21% increase since 2013

371 000

456 032

500 000
450 000
400 000
350 000
300 000
250 000
200 000
150 000
100 000
50 000
0

2012/2013 2013/2014 2014/2015 2015/2016 2016/2017 2017/2018 2018/2019 2019/2020 2020/2021 2021/2022 2022/2023 2023/2024 2024/2025

■ Public - University ■ Public - Polytechnic ■ Private - University ■ Private - Polytechnic

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25/11/2025   4

Students per type of institution

Women represent 54% of all students; men 46%.

University 64%

Polytechnic 36%

Universitário: 224 467 · 60 203
Politécnico: 134 928 · 28 637

Legend: ■ Público ■ Privado

X-axis: 0, 50 000, 100 000, 150 000, 200 000, 250 000, 300 000

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Enrolment per type of programme

Doctorate
25927
6%

Associate degree
22116
5%

Master
82940
19%

Integrated master
35330
8%

Bachelor
279859
62%

70% enrolled in Bachelor's and Integrated Master's; 5% in Short-Cycle (ISCED 5).

Fonte: DGEEC

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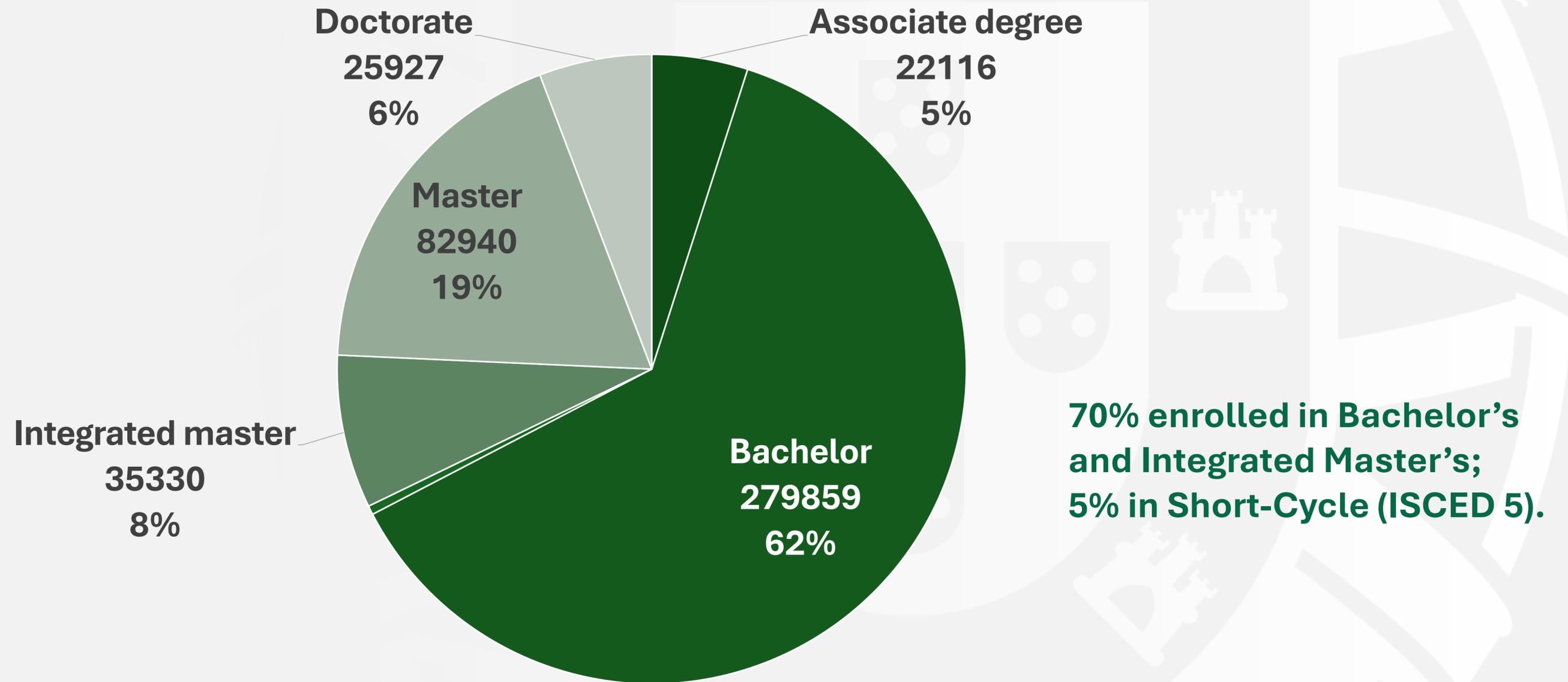
International students

Portugal surpasses the OECD average in the proportion of international students.

Over the past 10 years, the percentage of international students in Portugal has grown significantly
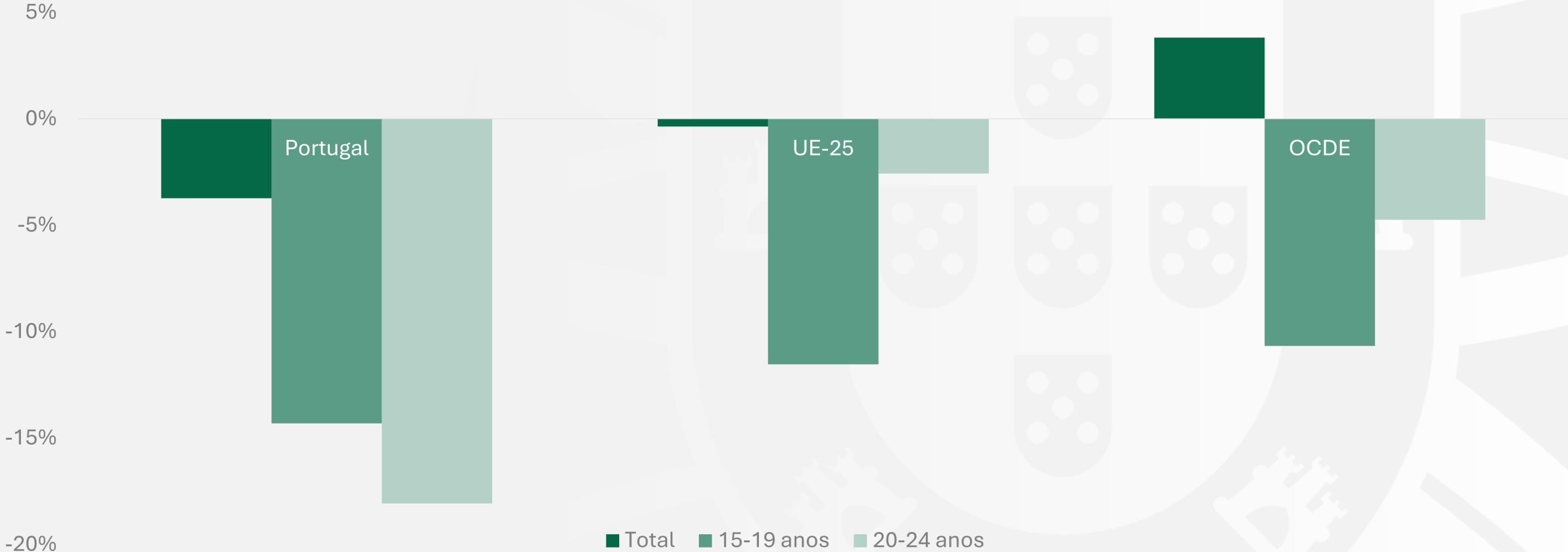

■ 2023 ■ 2013
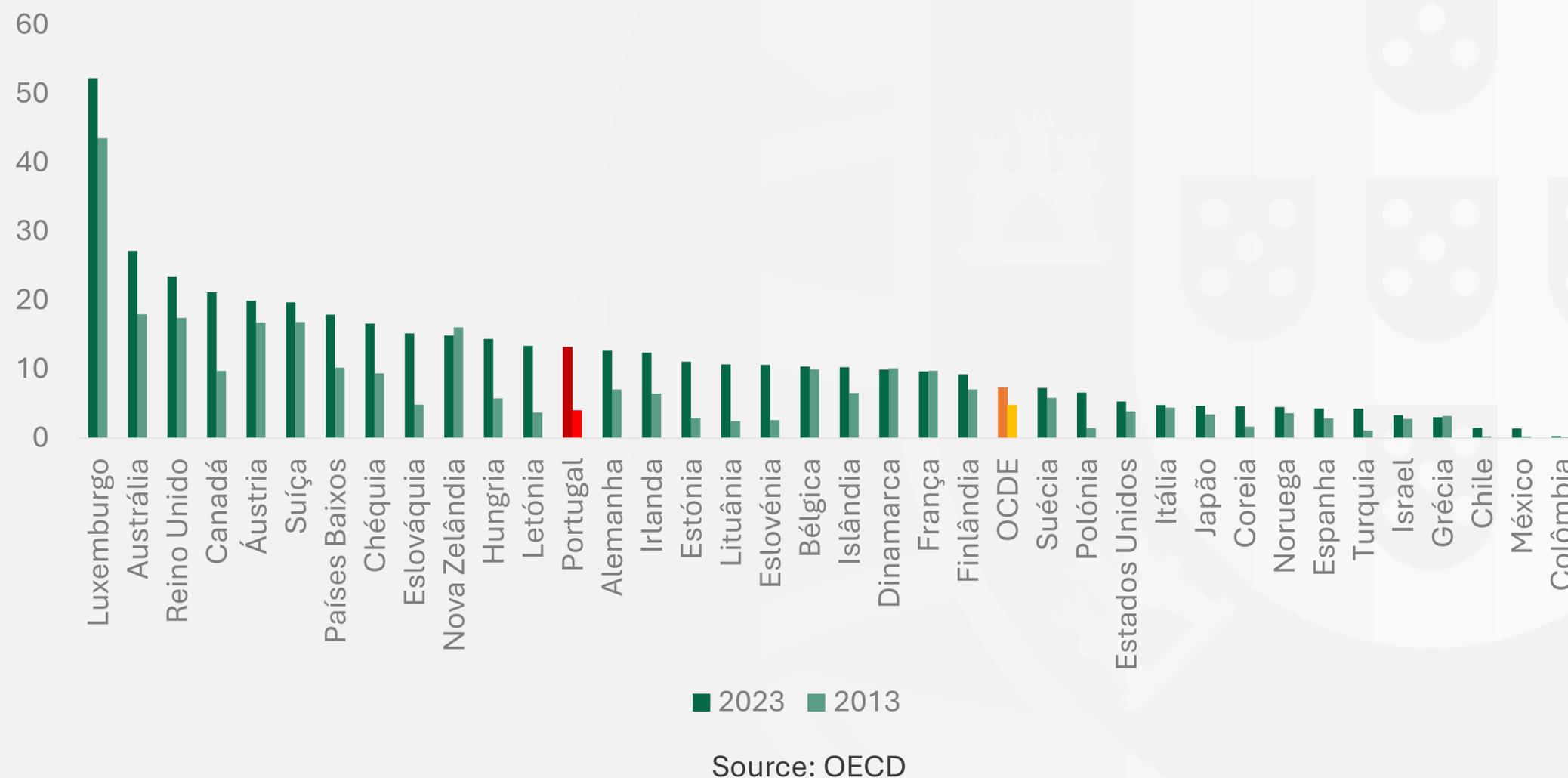
Source: OECD

Most international students come from Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa and from Brazil.

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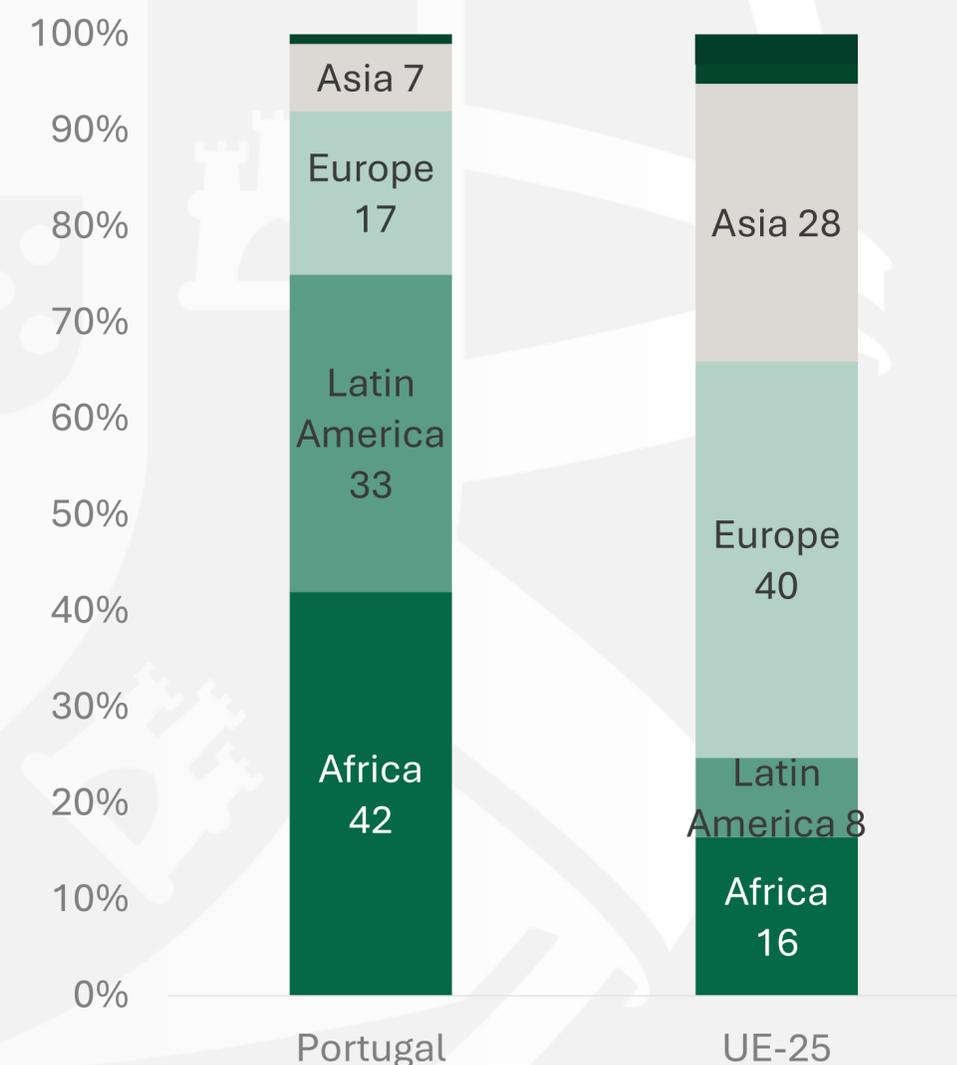
Population decline

Fewer young people of entry age

Portugal   UE-25   OCDE
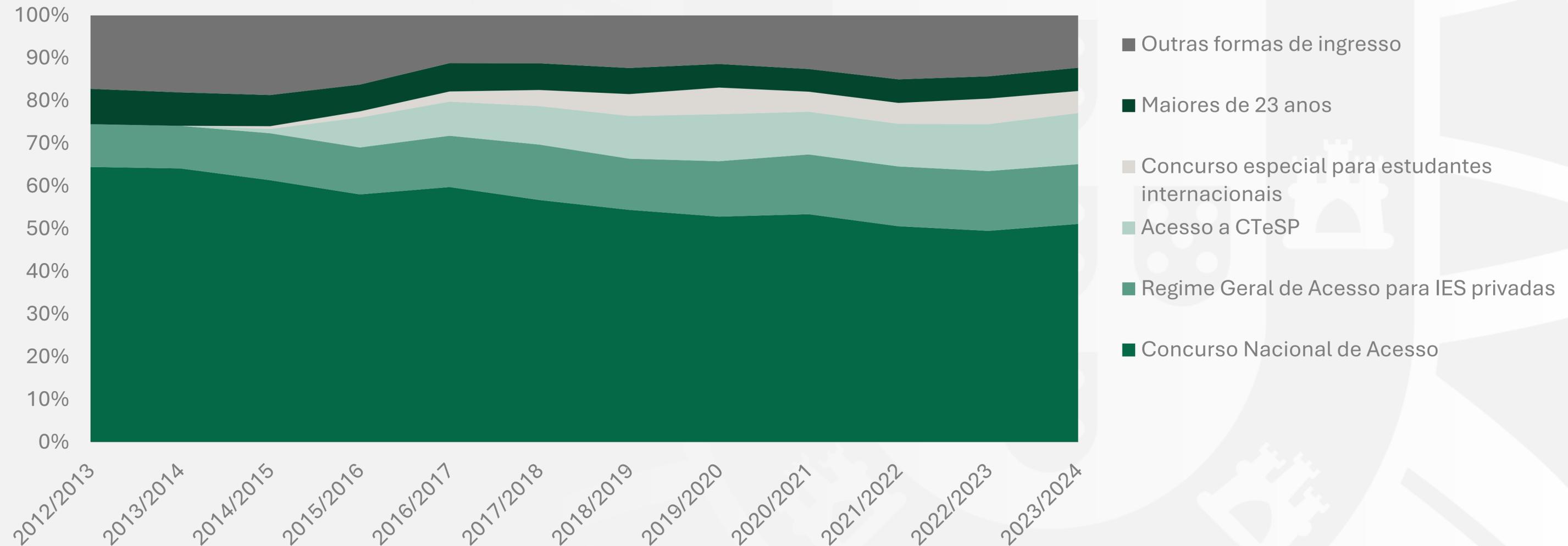
■ Total ■ 15-19 anos ■ 20-24 anos

Projected population variation between 2025 and 2040, by age group
Source: OECD

Entry pathways

More short-cycle tertiary education, more older adults, and more international students
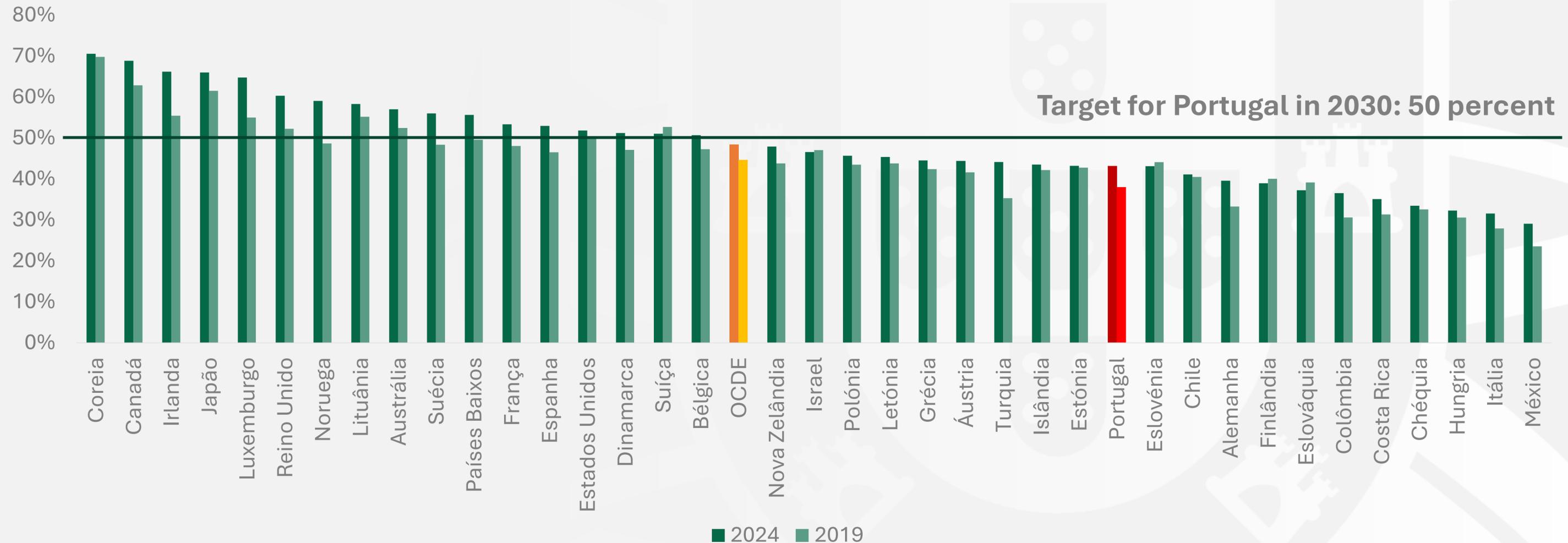

Evolution of the percentage of enrolled students, by form of admission
Source: DGEEC

Young adults with Higher Education
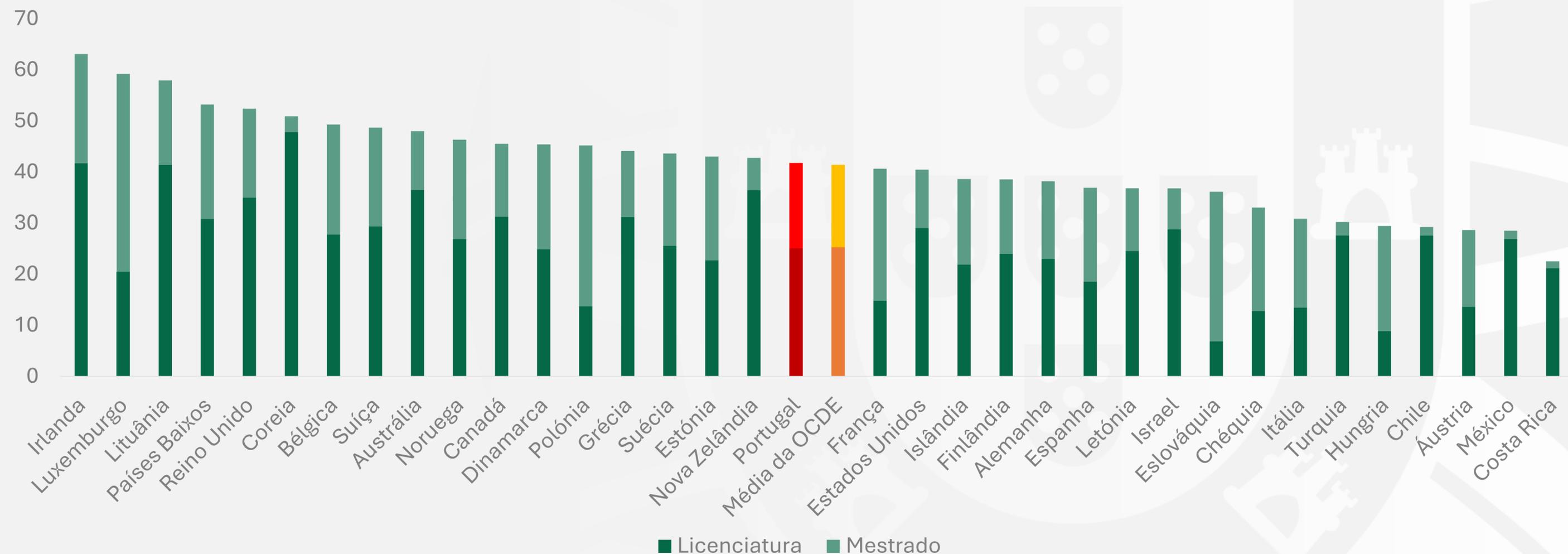
On the way to 50 percent in 2030

Target for Portugal in 2030: 50 percent

■ 2024 ■ 2019

Percentage of adults aged 25–34 with a higher-education degree
Source: OECD

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Young adults with a Bachelor's or Master's degree

Portugal slightly above the OECD average

Legend: ■ Licenciatura ■ Mestrado

Percentage of adults aged 25–34 with a Bachelor's or Master's degree (2024)
Source: OECD

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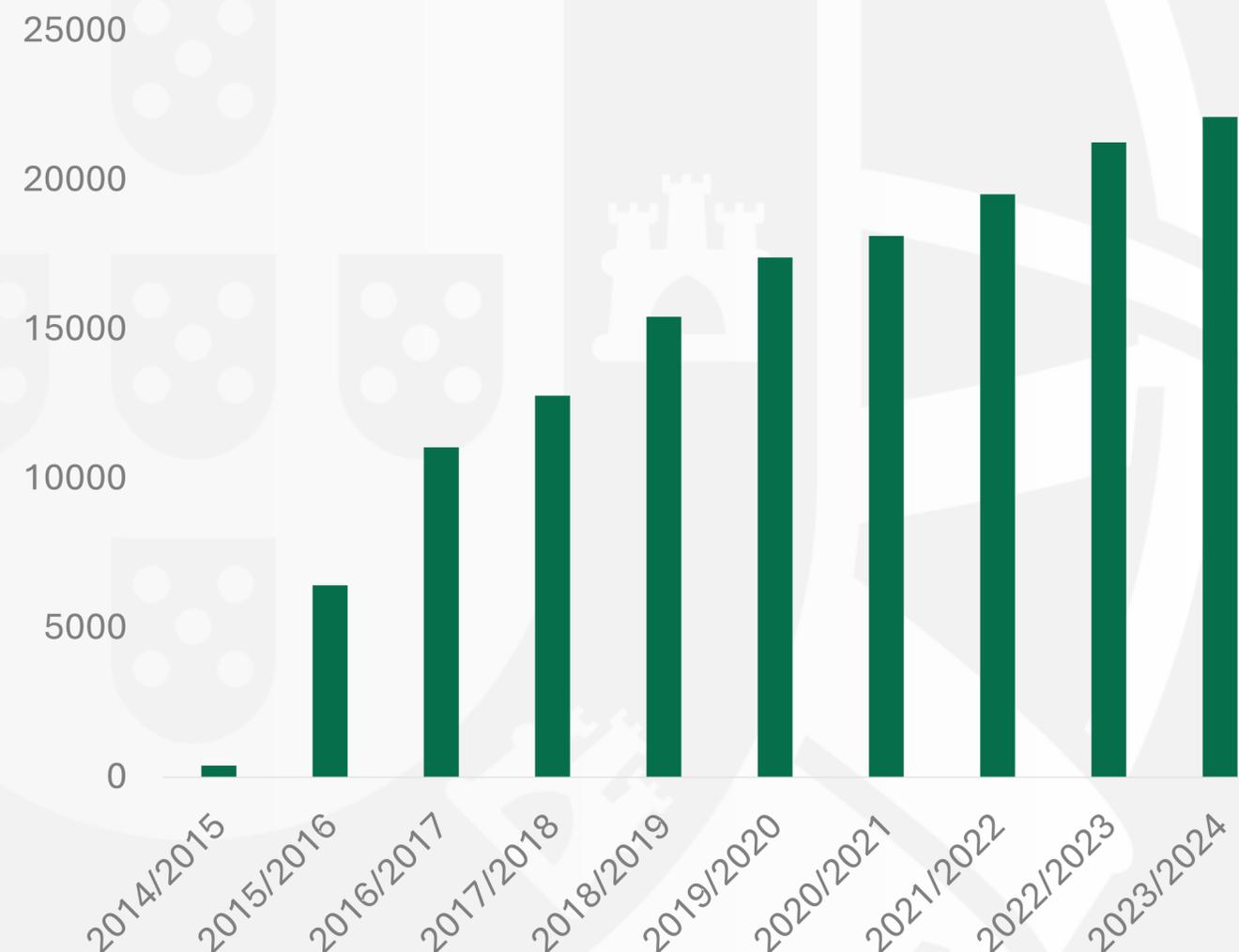# Short-cycle Tertiary Education (ISCED 5)

Portugal has a low percentage of young adults with short-cycle tertiary education (2024)
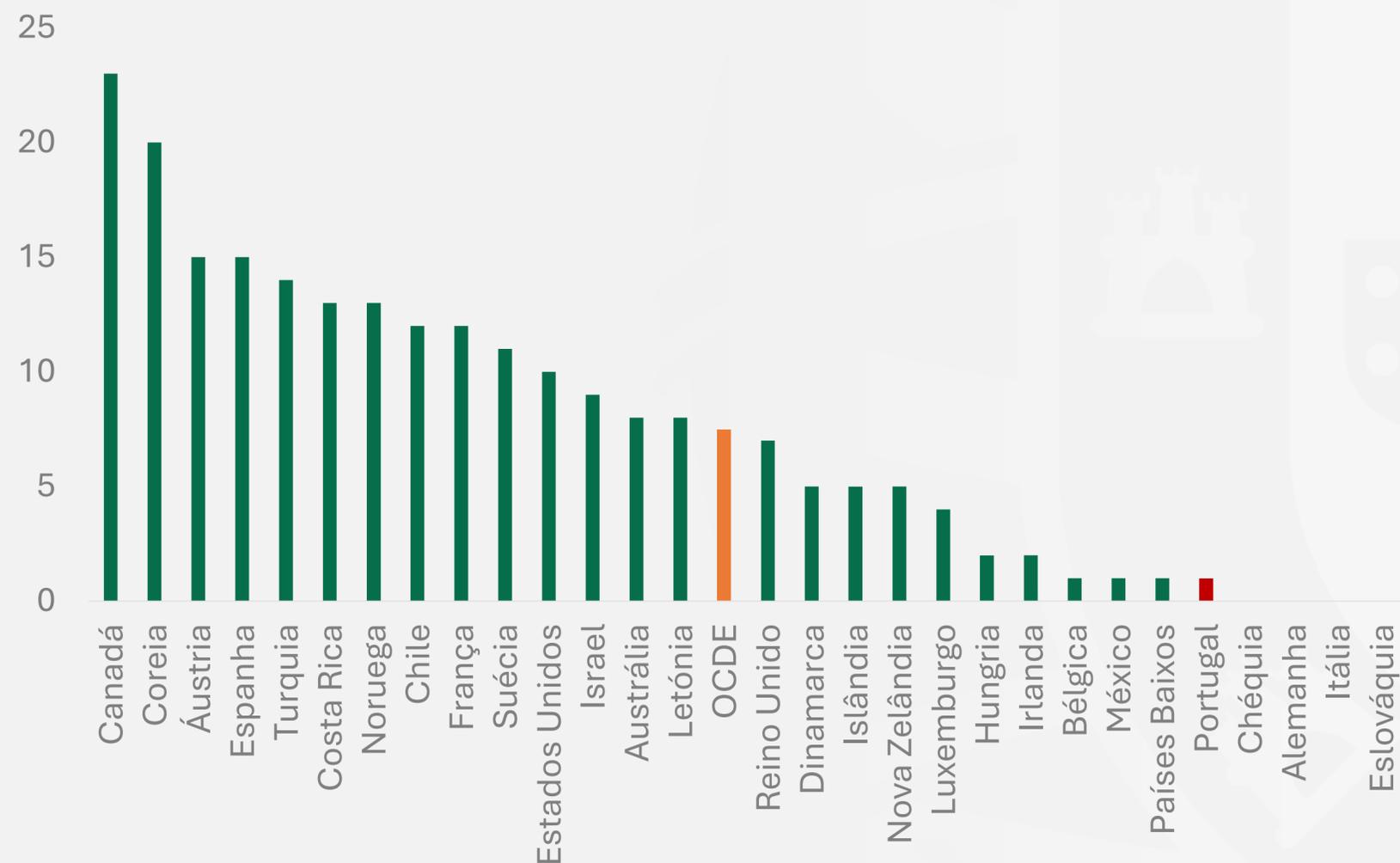
Percentage of adults aged 25–34 with short-cycle tertiary education
Source: OECD

The number of students enrolled in professional higher technical courses (CTeSP) has been increasing
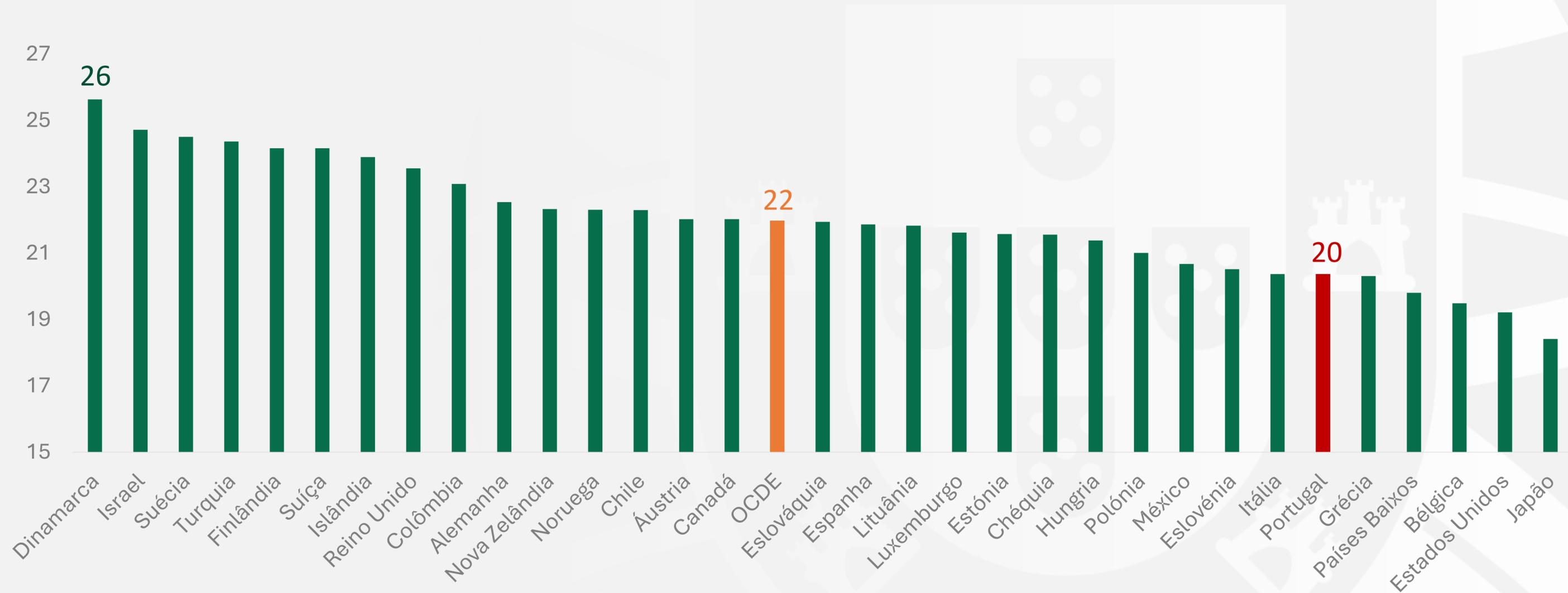

Total number of CTeSP enrolments
Source: DGEEC

Age of entry

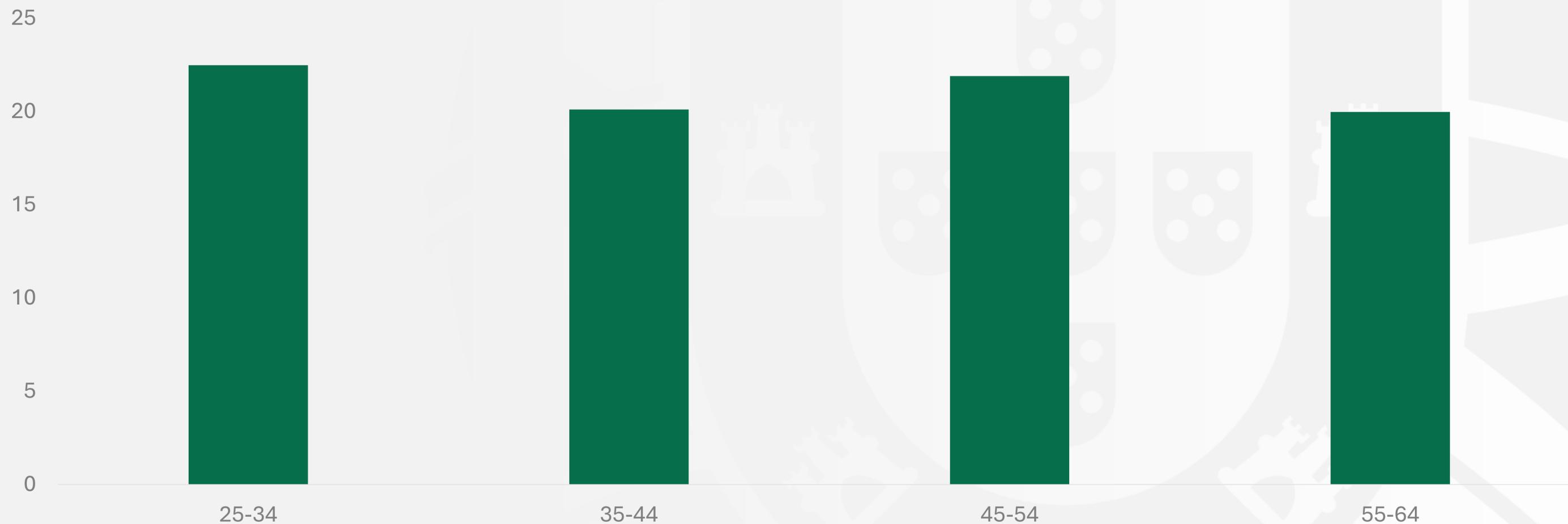## Portugal has one of the lowest average ages of entry into higher education in the OECD (2023)

Average age of first entry into Higher Education
Source: OECD

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Older adults prepared for Higher Education

Around one fifth of adults with only upper secondary education may be prepared to enter higher education
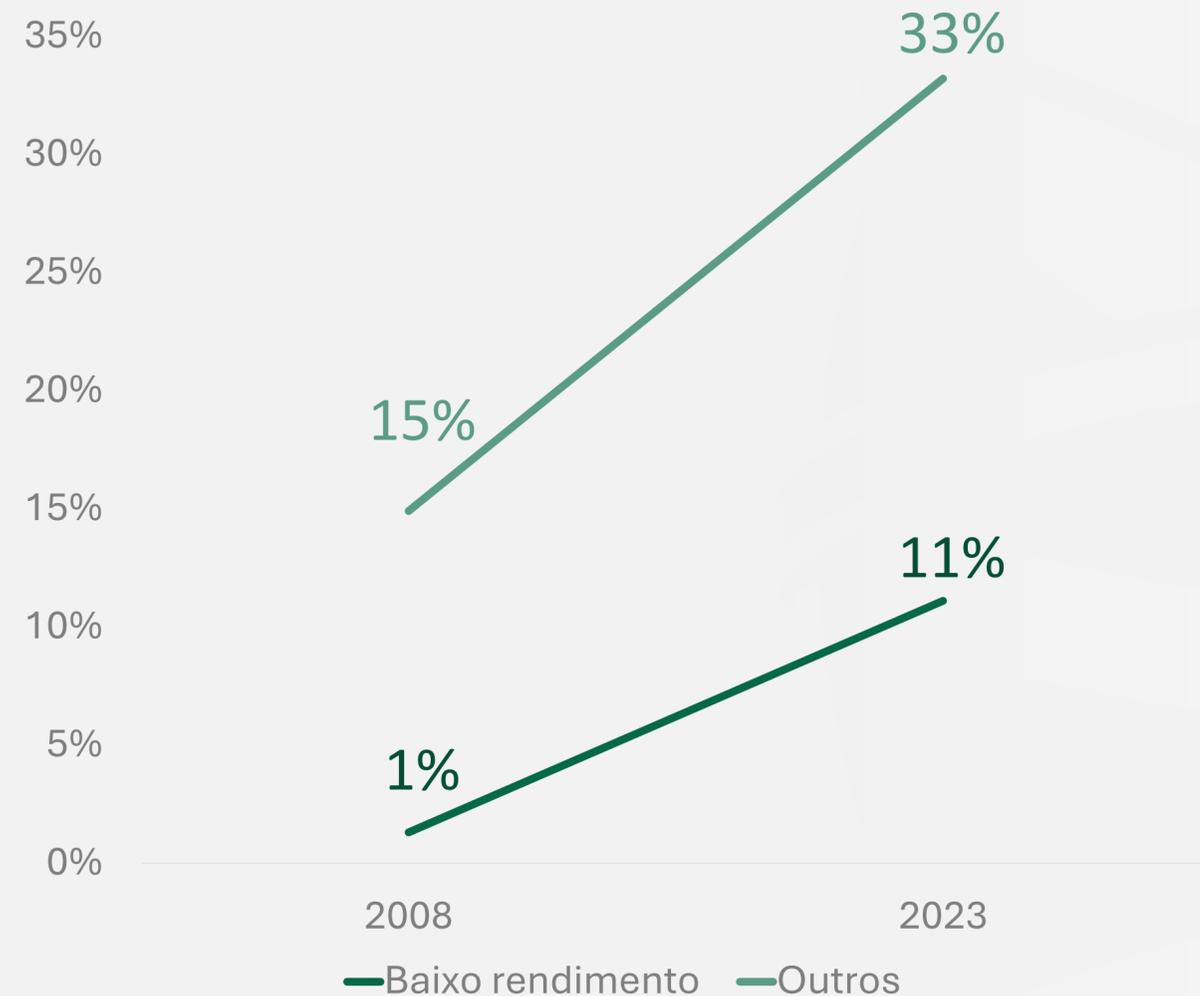

Percentage of adults in Portugal with upper secondary education and level-3 literacy or higher, by age group
Source: OECD

Access for students from low-income households

Unequal incomes, unequal qualifications

35%

33%

30%

25%

20%

15% — 15%

11%

10%

5%

1%

0%

2008   2023

—Baixo rendimento —Outros

Percentage of adults (16–65 years) with higher education, by income level
   2008: 1% (low income) vs 15% (others)
   2023: 11% (low income) vs 33% (others)
Source: Portugal, *Balanço Social 2024*

Student Aid in Higher Education in Portugal

3/4   of grant-holding students receive **only the minimum grant**.

Many eligible students do not apply because they do not know about the grant.

54%   of first-year grant recipients in the lowest family income band **had to repay at least part of the grant**.

Source: DGES and *Ação Social no Ensino Superior* (Nova SBE, 2025)

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The way forward

Increase participation - diversify the pool of applicants and broaden the social reach of higher education

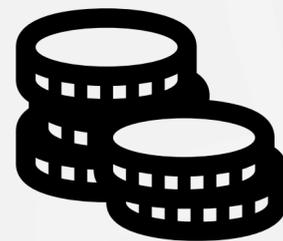Invest in short cycle Tertiary Education (ISCED 5)

Reform and strengthen financial support for students
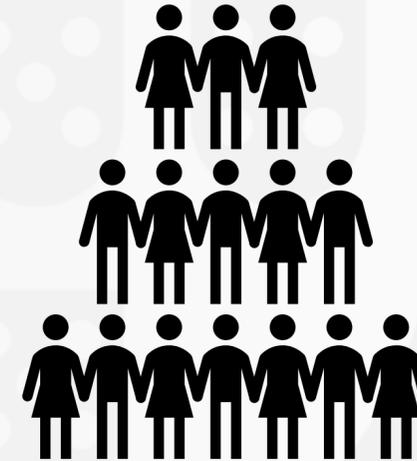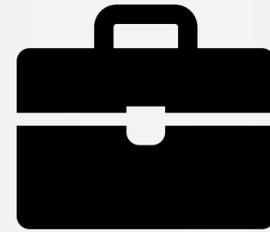
Expand educational opportunities for adults, name through micro-credentials

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Findings of the OECD study *Policies for Access and Success*

Transition rates from secondary to higher education remain strongly associated with socioeconomic background.

Students from low-income families (6%) are much less likely than those from high-income families (14%) to access highly competitive programmes (entry grades > 17/20).

Participation rates across regions are markedly unequal with significant differences between large cities and rural áreas.

Current grants (~84k/year) cover only a small fraction of real costs.

About 75% of grant holders receive only the minimum grant (~700 €/year).

Students and families view the system as complex; many eligible students do not apply.

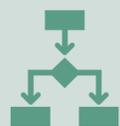REPÚBLICA PORTUGUESA | EDUCAÇÃO, CIÊNCIA E INOVAÇÃO

Recommendations of the OECD study *Policies for Access and Success*

Revise the formula for calculating the means tested grant, making an explicit contribution to tuition fees and an explicit contribution to the living costs,

Take into account the accommodation cost if the student has to relocate

Ensure that the system is implemented in a predictable, fair and effective manner

Continue to improve the accessibility of student housing

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The New Model

✓ **Full progressivity** of the grant system

📚 Alignment with the **real cost** faced by higher education students

🏛 Ensuring that all grant-holding students living away from home effectively receive the **accommodation support** to which they are entitled, thus addressing one of the main criticisms of the current grant system

$ Reduced uncertainty and stronger incentives for **very low-income** students.

▦ **Greater administrative efficiency** in the processing of applications and the allocation of grants – interoperability with other systems

ⓘ **Information** and **communication** are essential: a well-designed system must also be well understood.

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Final reflections

1. Clear information is essential
- A support system only works if students understand it
- New model will include a strong, student-centred communication strategy

2. Housing remains a priority
- Continued investment in affordable student accommodation
- Cooperation with institutions, municipalities and other providers

3. Higher education must be open to older adults
- Lifelong learning, requalification and flexible return pathways
- Modular, digital and flexible formats compatible with work and family life

4. Responding to demographic change
- Ageing population and shrinking youth cohort
- Adult upskilling is essential to meet labour-market needs

5. A system for all stages of life
- Higher education must be attractive and accessible for young people **and** adults
- Strengthening skills and supporting national and regional development

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